

I.W.P. (HONOURS) 1997

DEBORAH GARDEN

“ THE VIRGIN MARY - MATERNAL METAPHOR



A / 515 EDIZIONE BEATRICE D'ESTE - MILANO

Prodotto da D'Este

Despite the breakdown in the predominant Christian belief system, one of the most powerful symbols we still have of maternity, is the Virgin Mary. She is our most longstanding cultural icon, of both the feminine and the maternal. When considered in relation to the feminisation of Christ (a development unique to the Middle Ages) it becomes apparent that maternal sentiment, far from being an instinctive response to birth, is in fact socially constructed. The feminine attributes embedded within the cult of the Virgin Mary do not only affect those with a religious attitude; the qualities that she embodies as a woman and mother have become part of a set of cultural assumptions surrounding maternity, and have been internalised in individual women's expectations of themselves as mothers. Within western culture she is the mother most commonly depicted in the arts and the one most alive in the popular imagination. Tied in with her complex symbolic meanings are many of the attributes which we ascribe to women as mothers. As Marina Warner says in *Alone of All Her Sex* "the Virgin Mary is an icon of feminine perfection built on an equivalence between goodness, motherhood, purity, gentleness and submission."¹ The Virgin Mary has presented somewhat of a dilemma for feminists; on one hand she is the only feminine aspect of the Deity, within Christian culture, whose importance has at times rivalled that of Christ, yet at the same time her cult flourishes in countries such as Spain, Portugal and Italy where women rarely participate in public life and are confined to the home. To quote Marina Warner, "the Virgin Mary by defining the characteristics of womanliness as shrinking, obedience and by the active encouragement of these qualities as feminine reinforces the myth of female inferiority and dependence."² The contradictory meshing of power and submission which the icon of the Virgin Mary embodies has left feminists uncertain as to her place within a women's history, this ambivalence extends beyond the myth and cult of the Virgin and can be discerned within contemporary feminist discourse centred around maternity.

In the beginnings of the Women's Liberation Movement there was an emphasis on an equality in sameness, Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, represents this position. Here women's oppression is located primarily in their biology and services the social formation by the production of children and it is only by freeing women from reproduction that they will be able to participate equally in society. At the more extreme end of this position is Densmore's text, *On Celibacy*, which advocates a complete refusal of reproductive heterosexual sex. This denial of difference involved a disengagement with women's specific ability to give birth and rejected the experience of women's bodies. Other approaches in feminist theorising recognised that women's experiences were not represented in dominant accounts of knowledge and history and attempted to uncover the world of women, an equality in difference. Within this development two approaches become evident. One concentrates on the importance of mothering, of

which a text such as Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* is representative. The other maintains that women's unique creative potential has been eroded, notably in the institution of motherhood; Mary Daly's work falls within this position. In an article in *Refractory Girl* (1982) Rosi Braidotti considers that "feminists" as a collective political category operate in opposition to the traditional definition of women as mothers and that this sets up a dichotomy between revolutionary women(feminists) and mothers.³ Nonetheless, as Julia Kristeva points out in the *Powers of Horror*, despite the confusion of feminist ideologies which surround maternity women continue to have, and to want to have children. ⁴ There is an assumption that this is a perfectly natural desire, that women will automatically love their children and that a good mother just naturally knows what to do, that in fact women are by their very nature more suited to child rearing.

An historical understanding of the changes that the Virgin Mary has gone through over a period of time allows a picture to emerge of how a certain type of femininity has been actively constructed through visual imagery which, in preliterate Europe, was one of the main means of transferring ideas. There has been a complex interweaving of the religious ethic into the social fabric and many of the ideas we currently hold dear about the mother and maternity have taken root within the cult of the Virgin. The co-option of maternity and supposedly natural qualities that women as mothers possess serves both social and political purposes. Highlighting this co-option of maternal qualities is the development, within the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages, of a body of written and visual representation which speaks of the body of Jesus as maternal. During this period it is significant that socially inscribed feminine qualities were allowed to slip across the gender boundary and attributes normally associated with maternity could reside in a male body.⁵

Christianity has taken ideas and imagery from a variety of sources and incorporated them into its own ideological framework. The church's position on women, and the types of qualities that an iconic representation such as the Virgin Mary carries, are a complex mixture of Middle-Eastern, Roman and Greek culture. A device such as the virgin birth had a long precedence within these religions and was an established method of conferring divinity. One of the best known of these stories is that of Romulus and Remus (the mythical founders of Rome), supposedly born to a mother impregnated by the god Mars ⁶. The Christian church inherited a long history of a belief in the natural inferiority of women. This can be seen in both *The Timaeus* and *The Politics*, important philosophical texts for Medieval theologians. In *The Timaeus*, Plato says "a man who has led a good life might return to his native star; but if he does not lead a

good life he might have the misfortune to return to life as a woman.” In *The Politics*, Aristotle casually asserts women’s natural inferiority during a discussion on slavery and says that: “again the same holds true between man and other animals, tame animals are superior in their nature to wild animals, yet for all the former it is advantageous to be ruled by man since this gives them security. Also as between the sexes, the male is by nature superior and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject.”⁷

The cult of the Virgin Mary has not been a static construct and during the two thousand year history of the Christian Church has undergone several transformations. Michael Carroll notes that Mary is mentioned hardly more than a dozen times in the New Testament and then only in passing. In the Gospel of Mark (Mark 6:3), the earliest of the four Gospels, she is mentioned once and the Church’s earliest record, the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 1:14), mentions her only once. On the walls and sarcophagi of the third and fourth centuries she remains an inconsequential figure. From the latter part of the fifth century onwards there was a steady increase in the development of the Marian cult; this appears to be an aftermath of the Council of Ephesus (A.D.431) at which Mary was proclaimed *Theotokos*-“Mother of God”.⁸ We first see her represented as *Maria Regina*, in the first half of the sixth century, painted on the wall of the Church of Santa Maria Antiqua, the oldest Christian building in the Roman Forum. In this image it is Mary who is wearing the symbols of power, the costly paraphernalia and the diadem, and is seated in majesty on a throne whilst Christ and his father Joseph, who are both humbly dressed, stand beside her. In the same period Pope John vii commissioned a painting for the basilica of Saint Maria, in Trastevere, a sumptuously framed image of the Virgin Mary inscribed with votive words of praise.(see plate one) Mary is not only once again richly arrayed in clothes that state her royal rank but also carries the cross-surmounted staff (symbol of imperial power). Angels stand at her side carrying spears such as those carried by the Imperial Guard. Radiating around her crowned head is a huge nimbus and at her feet is an image of the reigning pope.⁹

This early Marian imagery emphasising the regal powerful aspects of the Virgin, far from being an indication of the esteem in which women were held, was a political necessity. This is because from the sixth century onwards the Popes in Rome were struggling with the Byzantine emperors in Constantinople and the Lombard kings in northern Italy and it was imperative that the new church based in Rome establish its authority. For this reason Mary was portrayed with all the trappings of wealth and power, following a well established classical tradition of personifying cities and institutions as goddesses. As the papacy gained power and influence in Rome greater veneration was accorded the Mother of God, as a way of emphasising the wealth and power of the church she symbolised.¹⁰

In *Alone of all her Sex* Marina Warner points out that from the twelfth century onwards there was a significant change in depictions of the Virgin Mary. This change was in part brought about by the influence of the Franciscan order, a mendicant order who worked extensively amongst the poor. According to Warner it was the Franciscans who fostered the notion of female humility, modesty, silence and obedience. Although the Virgin Mary's silence and modesty had always been held up as an example to other women it was the lowliness emphasised by the Franciscans that, as Marina Warner says "completely remodelled the cult of the Virgin."¹¹ It was Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), founder of the Franciscan order, who first placed a manger in the woods at Greccio and introduced the practice of the crib at Christmas. Here the Christ child is the main focus of worship and the mother bows before him. By the twelfth century Mary has left her throne, laid aside her robes, insignia and diadem and is portrayed sitting on the bare earth, dressed humbly as a peasant woman.

The image of the Madonna of Humility first appears in 1346, on a panel in Palermo, she is dressed in plain blue homespun cloth, seated on the bare earth. In another panel (attributed to Massacio) now in the National Gallery, Washington D.C., Mary is portrayed as a barefoot, plain, young girl, with a large strapping infant on her lap. The child is almost half her size, although still meant to be quite a young infant. It is this exaggerated size which ensures that the child is a primary visual focus and makes clear the importance of the Christ child. These images exemplify the new tone which began to dominate iconographic representations of the Virgin Mary in the early Middle Ages: Mary has moved from her queenly aspect and no longer sits enthroned on the right hand of Christ, but humbly adores her deified son seated on the bare earth. Here we have two contradictory representations, one which concentrates on the regal, powerful queenly nature of the Virgin and the other which focuses upon her humility, obedience and poverty. These contradictions highlight the socially constructed nature of these images and illustrate how bound into their specific historical period they are. Maternal sentiment, far from representing an essential part of human biological makeup is, as John Parsons states in *Medieval Mothering*, "an ideological, symbolic representation grounded in the basic material conditions that define women's reproductive lives."¹²

In her chapter *Let it Be* in *Alone of All Her Sex* Marina Warner analyses the impact of the [Franciscan orders] emphasis upon poverty and humility and the increasing number of images in which the Virgin kneels before her newly born son and adores him. She points out that within this Franciscan ideology the visions of Saint Bridget of Sweden(d.1373), in which the Virgin gives birth to the Christ child on her knees and then adores him, provide a focus for this changing relationship between mother and child. Bridget's visions were widely disseminated throughout fifteenth century Europe and many of the paintings of this period were

In *Alone of all her Sex* Marina Warner points out that from the twelfth century onwards there was a significant change in depictions of the Virgin Mary. This change was in part brought about by the influence of the Franciscan order, a mendicant order who worked extensively amongst the poor. According to Warner it was the Franciscans who fostered the notion of female humility, modesty, silence and obedience. Although the Virgin Mary's silence and modesty had always been held up as an example to other women it was the lowliness emphasised by the Franciscans that, as Marina Warner says "completely remodelled the cult of the Virgin."¹¹ It was Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), founder of the Franciscan order, who first placed a manger in the woods at Greccio and introduced the practice of the crib at Christmas. Here the Christ child is the main focus of worship and the mother bows before him. By the twelfth century Mary has left her throne, laid aside her robes, insignia and diadem and is portrayed sitting on the bare earth, dressed humbly as a peasant woman.

The image of the Madonna of Humility first appears in 1346, on a panel in Palermo, she is dressed in plain blue homespun cloth, seated on the bare earth. In another panel (attributed to Massacio) now in the National Gallery, Washington D.C., Mary is portrayed as a barefoot, plain, young girl, with a large strapping infant on her lap. The child is almost half her size, although still meant to be quite a young infant. It is this exaggerated size which ensures that the child is a primary visual focus and makes clear the importance of the Christ child. These images exemplify the new tone which began to dominate iconographic representations of the Virgin Mary in the early Middle Ages: Mary has moved from her queenly aspect and no longer sits enthroned on the right hand of Christ, but humbly adores her deified son seated on the bare earth. Here we have two contradictory representations, one which concentrates on the regal, powerful queenly nature of the Virgin and the other which focuses upon her humility, obedience and poverty. These contradictions highlight the socially constructed nature of these images and illustrate how bound into their specific historical period they are. Maternal sentiment, far from representing an essential part of human biological makeup is, as John Parsons states in *Medieval Mothering*, "an ideological, symbolic representation grounded in the basic material conditions that define women's reproductive lives."¹²

In her chapter *Let it Be* in *Alone of All Her Sex* Marina Warner analyses the impact of the [Franciscan orders] emphasis upon poverty and humility and the increasing number of images in which the Virgin kneels before her newly born son and adores him. She points out that within this Franciscan ideology the visions of Saint Bridget of Sweden(d.1373), in which the Virgin gives birth to the Christ child on her knees and then adores him, provide a focus for this changing relationship between mother and child. Bridget's visions were widely disseminated throughout fifteenth century Europe and many of the paintings of this period were

influenced by them. The Piero della Francesca held in the National Gallery in London, as well as several of Botticelli's paintings, deal with this theme of the mother kneeling before, and adoring her infant son. In *The Nativity*, painted by Robert Campin (d.1444), the Virgin, her blond hair loose, kneels before a tiny luminous baby whose radiance eclipses the light of the taper held in the hand of Saint Joseph. The scene is set within a humble byre and Mary's attention is totally focused upon the infant.(see plate two) The qualities of poverty, humility and obedience were encouraged for both men and women but it was during this period that the characteristics of those virtues - gentleness, docility and forbearance began to become increasingly associated with women.¹³ This passive and humble Mary is very different from the woman portrayed in the *Madonna della Misericordia* (c. 1445-8) where Mary towers monumental and independent, enveloping lay men and women with her protective mantle.(see plate three)

Marina Warner also looks at the work of the Penicaud's, a family of enamellers, whose work enjoyed a great deal of popularity during the fifteenth century and drew extensively from current stories and ideas. Their imagery gives an indication of the attributes emphasised around the Virgin Mary and recommended for women. There is an enamel plaque (held in the Gardener Museum in Boston) attributed to Nardon Penicaud (d.1542) where the "Virgin and child stand in the centre of a branching tree in which are perched the Virtues carrying phylacteries: of the theological virtues only charity is present (faith and hope omitted), of the cardinal virtues only prudence is present (no fortitude, justice, temperance), humility, patience, obedience, compassion, purity, truth praise and poverty all take their place around Mary" and the more active virtues are omitted.(see plate four) It is at this point one begins to discern the emerging picture of the bourgeois housewife, sweet, gentle, obedient to both her husband and God, accepting with fortitude the little daily toils, protected from involvement in the larger social environment because of her weakness and greater propensity to sin. Warner looks at both the *Le Managier de Paris* (1392-94) and the *Livre du Chevalier de la Tour Landry* (1372) and notes the convergence of a social code of behaviour with a spiritual ideal demonstrated in these popular secular books of instruction for young women. In *Le Managier de Paris* an old, rich husband instructs his new young bride, telling her that the duty of woman is "the salvation of your soul and the comfort of your husband."¹⁴

Warner points out it was the affluence of the newly emerging trading class which allowed the wives and daughters of wealthy merchants to remain at home and enabled the development of the modern notion of the full-time mother totally occupied in the domestic environment.¹⁵ Within this new economic reality a certain type of family came to be encouraged, a family that would best suit the interests of the emerging bourgeoisie. The imagery depicting the Virgin and the Holy family began to reflect this new domestic idealism. Warner notes that within

this body of imagery, Joseph, the husband of Mary, began to receive increasing attention. From the fifteenth century onwards, within Christian art, we see a proliferation of images focusing on the trivial domestic details in the life of the Holy family. Anne of Cleve's *Book of Hours* of this period, now in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York, portrays

Mary, Joseph and the child by the fireside, while Joseph rocks in a chair and draws on a homely pipe or feeds the baby from a bowl of warmed milk with a wooden spoon. In other illuminations, the infant Jesus takes his first hesitant steps in a walking frame while Joseph proudly supervises, a similar theme is also evident in the series of miniatures attributed to Simon Benin, in the Walters Gallery in Baltimore. The Holy family formed a second trinity, an earthly mirror of the heavenly trinity.¹⁶

This encouragement of a certain type of family within the imagery of the church highlights how developments within the religious aspects of culture particularly prior to this century, were not two separate spheres. Instead they were mutually supportive and the type of family life encouraged by the church was well suited to the economic interests of the newly emerging merchant class.

By the fifteenth century the types of attributes ascribed to the Virgin Mary have become focused on the qualities that are most beneficial for a domesticated role for women: obedience, humility and selflessness. These attributes are increasingly associated with women and necessary for her to display to prove her womanliness. Men were encouraged to have similar qualities but the cultivation of docility, obedience and selflessness in a man would have compromised his ability to function in a society where a more assertive approach to life was needed to enable him to survive a life which was not always kind or benevolent.

The work of the medieval scholar Caroline Bynum in the *Zone* series *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*¹⁷ reveals an interesting phenomenon unique to the Middle Ages that demonstrates the inconsistencies within a biologically essentialist viewpoint of the gendered nature of maternal sentiments. This is the use of a feminised, corporeal language to describe religious experiences and an identification of Christ as maternal. It is specific to the Middle Ages and reached its most refined expression during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. There have been several scholars of medieval history who have noted the use of maternal imagery in medieval authors. In her book *Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages*, Caroline Bynum mentions medieval theologians such as Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, William of St. Thierry, Aelred of Rievaulx and Adam, Abbot of Perseigne, all of whose writings contain references to Christ as mother and also to themselves as mothers to the monks who were under their care. She quotes Anselm of Canterbury describing the consoling, nurturing Jesus as a hen gathering her chicks under her wing and suggesting that mother Jesus revives the soul at her breast. Margaret of Oingt describes Jesus's pain on the cross as birth pangs and Gueric of Igny in the twelfth century and Catherine of Sienna in the fourteenth century speak of Jesus as nursing

the soul at his breast.(see plate five) In the words of Bernard, a well known medieval theologian, “Suck not the wounds but rather the breasts of the crucified.” Bynum points out that the use of maternal imagery when describing Christ and his relationship to his flock clarifies why several northern Renaissance paintings by Jan Gossaert show the Christ child with a strange engorging of the breasts.(see plate six) Moralised bibles of thirteenth and fourteenth century artists depicted the Church being born from Christ’s side and miniatures and panel paintings from this period show Christ exuding wine or blood into a chalice or even into hungry mouths.¹⁸

This rise from the eleventh century on, of a lyrical, emotional piety that focuses on the maternal human qualities of Christ, with descriptions of God as a woman nursing the soul at her breasts, drying its tears, punishing its petty mischiefs, giving birth to it in agony and travail, is not an indication that women occupied a more esteemed place within medieval society. This particular phenomenon seems to be more indicative of an absorption of femininity within the maternal function. Bynum speculates that the new religious significance that the body acquired in the period from 1200-1500, which includes representations of Christ as mother, may mark a turning point in the history of the body in the west.¹⁹ Rather than indicating an environment of greater respect for women, these descriptions of Christ as feminine are an attempt by medieval theologians to humanise God to make him more approachable. It was also a response by medieval theologians to the often onerous responsibilities involved in the care of large numbers of monks, as the dying Aelred of Rievaulx said to his own monks “I love you all... as earnestly as a mother does her sons.”²⁰ Bynum considers that the response to these two factors, the personalising of God and the relationship of care involved in managing large numbers of dependant monks, explains the use of a feminised language: a language which is emotive and corporeal, and heavily reliant upon maternal metaphor as a device to indicate nurture and care. Although this particular aspect of Christian imagery is peculiar to the Middle Ages, its existence undermines the assumption that maternal qualities such as tenderness, nurturing and compassion are an essential and instinctive part of women’s biological nature and an inherent aspect of her maternal function. In the accounts and depictions of medieval churchmen, describing themselves as mothers to their flocks, of Christ feeding the faithful at his breast and giving birth to them from his side, those qualities which are commonly associated with maternity become flexible enough to move across gender boundaries and reside in a male body.

Julie Kristeva points out in *The Powers of Horror* that with “the demise of the cult of the Virgin we in the west are left without a satisfactory discourse about maternity.”²¹ However, rather than being left without a discourse on maternity, we have inherited a long history of maternal discourse. I am not suggesting that the Virgin Mary is the only socially sanctioned representation of maternity but that she

has been one of the most enduring, serving as a prototype for many of the images that have been generated around the mother child-relationship. This includes women's own representations of maternal sentiment: Kathe Kollitz's moving images of mothers and children, whilst presenting a biting critique of contemporary social conditions, leave many of our expectations regarding the strength and sanctity of the mother child relationship firmly in place. In her *Post Partum Document*, produced in 1976, you are struck by Mary Kelly's complete lack of sentimentalising of the theme of maternity, which stands out so clearly because it is so unusual within visual representation of mothers with their children.

The types of assumptions which I have focused on within the maternal imagery of the Virgin are as prevalent in scientific discourse as they are within the church. Christine Everingham, in *Motherhood and Modernity*, questions sociological theories which are grounded in a long intellectual history of phallogentric thinking which unquestioningly assumes that women have a 'natural' suitability for the rearing of small infants, and which divides human experience along sexual lines. She points out that there is an assumption that nurturing is an entirely natural process, that women are born loving their children and that they are by nature the ones ideally suited to look after them. Within this framework there are two implicit core precepts. One is that nurturing is an instrumental act, and the child's needs are an objective reality. Therefore nurturing is not analysed as a socialisation process because the mother instinctively knows what to do. The other assumption is that mother love is unsocialised, that the emotions that pass between a mother and her child are a product of their biological makeup, they are not socialised emotions and so do not appear to have a value component. This, most formative of relationships is returned to the private domestic sphere and left to each woman's personal inclinations and it is assumed that because she loves her child, as, of course, all mothers do, she will instinctively do what is best.

This raises the question of whether the type of isolation and displacement which attend modern maternity is a natural part of the maternal environment. C. Lee and S. Burke in *Who'd Be A Mother?*²⁴ liken the dislocation, loneliness and need for affirmation of new mothers to the effects of a nervous breakdown. Many of the maternal qualities that women expect to automatically be theirs once they give birth, are far from an instinctive response, but are part of an elaborate social construct centred around maternity. This discourse emphasises woman's docility, a nature more emotional than men's, her suitability for domestic labour and her capacity to love small infants. It does not necessarily follow that these are the normal experiences of women when they first have the full-time care of a small baby, and in fact the evidence is that women with small children are often socially isolated and amongst the poorest socio-economic groups in contemporary Western society.

Psychoanalytic theory, one of the new scientific disciplines to emerge at the end of the nineteenth century, provided a theoretical language with which to analyse the construction of human personality. It has been a useful tool for twentieth century feminists attempting to understand the construction of the gendered subject. However psychoanalytic theory too has an uneasy relationship with the mother. According to Jacques Lacan, a French theorist and psychoanalyst, the maternal space exists before the acquisition of language, it is the gaining of language which signals the child's entry into the world, a position which can only be assumed by a refusal of the primitive, infantile relation with the mother.²¹ Once again, the female subject hovers outside culture and as Jessica Benjamin says in *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination*, "the mother serves as the prototype of the undifferentiated object. She serves as the other."²⁵

Sigmund Freud's work, in the last part of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, forms the historical background of and is germinal to, contemporary psychoanalytical theory. Freud is considered the father of modern psychology and recent work such as that of Jacques Lacan draws heavily upon Freud's theories. Freud's theory of the Oedipus complex and of historical social development posits that human social organisation is grounded in the competition between fathers and sons and that Western culture is founded on patricide. Challenging Freud's construction, Luce Irigaray, herself once a student of Lacan's, suggests that rather than contemporary culture being based on patricide, it is instead grounded in the unacknowledged murder of the mother. Reinterpreting the story of Clytemnestra, she suggests that this myth indicates a point where an older order of mother right is being supplanted and that this is signalling the new patriarchal order which is built upon the sacrifice of the mother and her daughters. Thus, rather than culture being underpinned by the Oedipal drama and father murder, it is grounded in the murder of the mother. According to Irigaray the main cultural taboo is not the son's incestuous desire for his mother and his wish to remove the father in order to have exclusive access to her, but the relationship with the mother, which she describes as a "mad desire", the "dark continent" which remains in the shadow of our culture. She maintains that the "maternal function underpins the social order and the order of desire."²⁶ Within contemporary psychoanalytic writing and theorising the phallus enjoys a privileged position as the entry point into culture, obscuring the primary role that the placenta and umbilical cord have as universal signifiers. Both of these substances are common to men and women while the phallus is an organ possessed by only one half of the species.²⁷ Modern psychoanalytic theories, regarding the role of the mother, carry the same contradictions as the Virgin Mary herself, placing the mother outside the social order while she remains infinitely powerful within the development of the child's psyche. This strange cocktail of power and powerlessness is a mixture already encountered within the myth and cult of the

Virgin. The mother is not an autonomous subject but a relationship which must be transcended in order for the child to gain access to the symbolic order and a place in the world but, like the Virgin, she is a place to return to when in need of love, compassion and nurturing.²⁸

The history of the Christian Church encompasses two millennium but because of the diminished role taken by the church in Australian political and secular affairs there is a temptation to underestimate its previous influence. It has been one of the main institutions which has formulated the moral and social climate informing the way people live. Within the history of the Roman Catholic Church the image of the Virgin Mary has been one of the most potent symbols we in the West have of the maternal/feminine and the closest we have come to something resembling a female Deity.

The last century has seen an increasing involvement of women outside the traditional spheres of home and family with the modern secular woman seemingly removed from the restricted models presented within past church teachings. However, the vision of mother we have is intricately bound within an historical, cultural construction which has been partially formulated by the teachings of the church. Within the framework of women's changing role in Western twentieth century society, the Virgin Mary represents a type of femininity that is counter to an active involvement in cultural and political life. It is not surprising that she has waned in power in modern western societies over the last century. Yet the maternal qualities which the Virgin Mary embodies are embedded within the cultural fabric and can be seen in images of maternity portrayed in film and television or smiling at us from Mother's Day cards, the remnants of the Queen of Heaven, loving her exceptional child, weeping at his suffering, soothing his pain and by extension the pain of the world. These qualities have become part of an internalised expectation of maternity and maternal emotions. Current political policies regarding child care, abortion and women's place in the work force are based upon assumptions about women's biological/emotional superiority as child carers. There is an inherent contradiction between the high value placed upon motherliness and motherhood by the church and society and the actual position which is granted to women who are mothers.²⁹

Over the last few decades there has been an increasing number of women participating in the paid workforce, this has been facilitated by equal opportunity legislation, the provision of childcare, and women's changing economic expectations. However, despite these changes the main political and social institutions are still dominated by men. Women are still the primary carers of small infants and responsible for domestic labour, both work that is considered menial. Since prestige in Western societies is conferred by occupational status, women's domestic and child raising activities (unpaid and not acknowledged as

work) when placed in a context where wages reflect value, is not highly regarded.²⁹ Without a reassessment of maternity and the general debt our culture owes to women as mothers it seems unlikely that women will be able to move into a fifty percent involvement in the political and economic institutions that are the main sources of power in our culture.

In *Medieval Mothering* John Parsons quotes Scheper-Hughes "If even emotions are discourse; they are constructed and produced in language and in human interactions, without our cultures we simply would not know how to feel." He goes on to say that "larger than life emotions allocated to 'Mother' in contemporary culture may burden our capacity to examine the mothering of the past. Our modern yearning for mothering has been cast as timeless by psychological themes. It is possible it is as culture induced, perhaps even as unhealthy, as our yearning for white sugar."³⁰ The myth of the Virgin Mary indicates the qualities which at different historical points western culture chose to emphasise as the ideal of feminine behaviour; this particular type of femininity served the political and social contingencies of the time and was informed by a long history, much preceding that of Christianity, of ambivalence towards women. The Virgin Mary has been regal and queenly in the early Middle Ages when the church required a symbol of its own pomp and power, and in the later Middle Ages she became the humble, chaste, obedient mother kneeling before her infant son. Although the Virgin Mary is mentioned barely more than half a dozen times in the New Testament, she assumed a prominent place in the writings and visual representations of the church and even in the late twentieth century was still the mother most frequently represented within our culture.

The myth and cult of the Virgin Mary offers a full historical range of reflections upon motherhood. Mary, Mother of God has been represented as a paragon of maternity, a symbol that has shaped maternal behaviour for two thousand years, affecting and controlling women's lives by setting the bounds of what constitutes socialised maternal emotions. In contrast to the exalted matriarchs of the early Christian church modern images of the Virgin Mary appear vapid and passive because, Marina Warner maintains, these are the only types of deified femininity our present patriarchal culture could allow to survive. It is not only women who are implicated in this social construction, the other side of the femininity which the cult of the Virgin Mary encourages is the valorisation of a certain type of masculinity. In the countries where her cult is the most virulent, in contrast to her obedience and submission is the male cult of machismo. Medieval depictions of Christ as mother raise the question of how specific the qualities of selflessness, tenderness and compliance are to the maternal experience. Does maternity allow women access to a greater reservoir of selfless love and compassion? The fact that a body of representations exist focusing on the

nurturing, consoling, mothering Christ challenges the idea that these qualities are integral to women's nature because of their ability to give birth. Mother Christ highlights the socially constructed nature of maternal sentiment and demonstrates that if it is expedient for social or political purposes maternal sentiment can cross gender boundaries and reside in a male body. It is easy to consider the mother-child relationship as a fundamental 'natural' law, an instinctive response to birth, and an unquestioned bond of love, but a consideration of the myth and cult of the Virgin Mary reveals the social and political factors which have made her our cultures most enduring icon of maternity.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Warner, M. Alone of all her Sex: The myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary. p.335 N.Y. 1983
- 2 Warner, M. A.A.H.S. p.191 N.Y. 1983
- 3 Braidotti, R. Mother/Daughters/Feminists: The Darkest Continent. pp.9-10 in Refractory Girl March 1982. Sydney
- 4 Irigaray, L. & Whitford, M. The Irigaray Reader. p.160 Oxford 1986
- 5 Bynum, C. The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages. pp.161-198 N.Y. 1982
- 6 Warner, M. A.A.H.S. p.177-178
- 7 Warner, M. A.A.H.S. p.178
- 8 Carroll, M. The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins. P.9 New Jersey. 1989
- 9 Warner, M. A.A.H.S. p. 107
- 10 Warner, M. A.A.H.S. p 105
- 11 Warner, M. A.A.H.S. P.182
- 12 Parsons M. A.A.H.S. pp.183,184,185.
- 14 Warner, M. A.A.H.S. p.184
- 15 Schwartz, . The Mother Puzzle. p.117 N.Y. 1993
- 16 Warner, M. A.A.H.S. p.189
- 17 Bynum, C. pp.161-198 The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Late Middle Ages. in the Zone series Fragments For a History of the Human Body. vol.1 Berkley. 1982
- 18 Bynum, C. A.A.H.S. pp.126,129,135,136,138,139 Berkley. 1982
- 19 Bynum, C. p. A.A.H.S. 162 Berkley 1982
- 20 Bynum, C. Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages. pp.113,115,126.
- 21 Warner, M. A.A.H.S. p.25
- 22 Moi, T. The Kristeva Reader/Julia Kristeva p.160 Oxford. 1986
- 23 Everingham, C. Motherhood and Modernity pp.21,22,23. Sydney 1994
- 24 Lee, C. & Burke, S. Who'd Be a Mother? p.162-163 Sydney 1990
- 25 Benjamin, J. The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism, and the Problem of Domination. p.77 N.Y. 1983
- 26 Irigaray, L. & Whitford, M. The Irigaray Reader. p.35 London 1991
- 27 Grosz, E. Jacques Lacan: a Feminist Introduction. London 1990
- 28 Poletnick, M. Why Men Dont Rear Children in Mothering Essays in Feminist Theory ed. Trebilcot, J. pp.23,24,27,30. Savage. 1983
- 29 Carr, A. Motherhood: Experience, Institution, Theology. p.65 New Jersey 1989
- 30 Parsons, J. & Wheeler, B. Medieval Mothering. p.16 N.Y. 1996



Plate 1

"La Madonna di Santa Maria in Trastevere"

Artist unknown, 6th century



Plate 2

"The Nativity"

Robert Campin, 1444



Plate 3

"Madonna della Misericordia"

Piero della Francesca, 1445-8



Plate 4

"The virgin and Child on a Jesse tree."

Hardon Penicaud

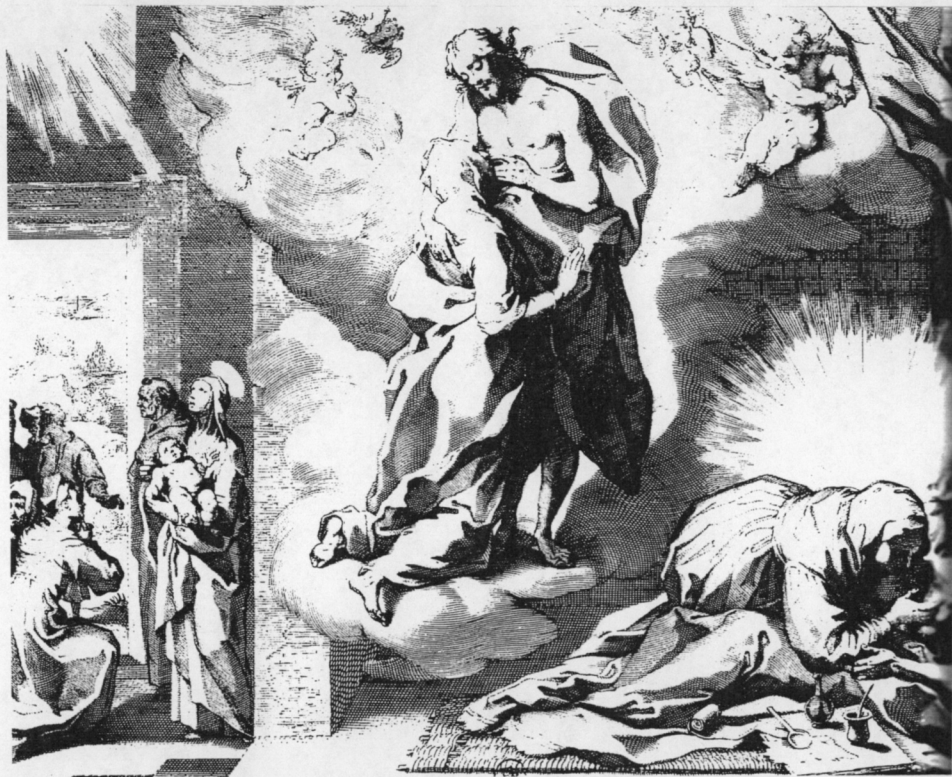


Plate 5

"Saint Catherine of Siena"

M. Fiorini after F. Venni, 1597



Plate 6
"Madonna and child"
Jan Gossardt, 1527

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Auge, F. "Older Women, Stout Hearted Women, Women of Substance." in Zone Vol. 3 pp.281-299. Eds. Feher, Naddaff & Tazir. New York: Urzone, 1989.
- Benjamin, J. The Bonds of Love : Psychoanalysis , Feminism, and the Problem of Domination. N.Y: Pantheon Books, 1983.
- Braidotti, R. "Mothers/ Daughters/ Feminists: The Darkest Continent." in Refractory Girl. March edition Sydney: Womens Study Group. 1982.
- Briffault, R. The Mothers. London, Allen & Unwin, 1959.
- Bynum, C. Jesus as Mother: Studies in the Spirituality of the High Middle Ages. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982.
- Bynum, C. "The Female Body and Religious Practice in Late Middle Ages." in Zone. Vol. 1. pp.161-219. Eds. Feher, Naddaff & Tazir. N.Y: `Urzone, 1983
- Carr, A. Motherhood : Experience , Institution , Theology. Edinburgh, Tand & Clark. 1989.
- Carrol, M. The Cult of the Virgin Mary : Psychological Origins. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989.
- Daly, M. The Church and the Second Sex. New York: Harper-Colophon, 1989.
- Deleuze, G.&Guattari, F. Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia. New York: Viking Press, 1979.

- Dubish, J. In a Different Place: Pilgrimage, Gender and Politics at a Greek Island. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1986.
- Everingham, C. Motherhood and Modernity. Sydney: Open University Press, 1994.
- Fletcher, A. & Benjamin Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: the Work of Julia Kristeva. London, New York, 1990.
- Grosz, E. Futur*Fall: Excursions into Post Modernity. Sydney: Power Institute of Fine Arts, University of Sydney, 1986.
- Grosz, E. Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Irigaray, L. & Whitford, M. The Irigaray Reader / Luce Irigaray. Cambridge, Mass: Basil Blackwell, 1989.
- Lee, C. & Burke, S. Who'd Be a Mother? Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1990.
- Moi, T. The Kristeva Reader / Julia Kristeva. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986.
- Parsons, J. & Wheeler, B. Medieval Mothering. New York: Garland Publishing, 1996.
- Phoenix, A. Motherhood: Meanings, Practices and Ideologies. London: Sage, 1991.
- Ruddick, Sara. Maternal Thinking: Towards a Politics of Peace. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.
- Schwartz, J. The Mother Puzzle. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993.

Trebilcot, J.

Mothering: Essays in Feminist Theory.
Savage, Maryland: Rowan & Allenheld, 1983.

Warner, Marina.

Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult
of the Virgin Mary. New York: Vintage
Press, 1983.